

Death by Suburb sermon series
#3 – Self: Look at the Size of My SUV!
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When I was in middle school, I was browsing in the mall one day when I saw the coolest sweatshirt. It was green and said “Slippery Rock University” on it. I had never heard of that place before and had no idea where it was. I didn’t even realize it was a real school. But it was a cool name and a cool sweatshirt, so I bought it.

About a week later, when I was wearing it, a man stopped me and said, “Hey, Slippery Rock! I graduated from there. Do you know someone who goes there?” No. “Do you want to go there?” No. “Do you know where it is?” No. “Then why are you wearing the sweatshirt?” I don’t know.

Looking back now, I do know. I was wearing it because I thought it looked cool, and by extension I thought wearing it made me look cool. That sweatshirt is long gone, but I have plenty of other things that I’ve placed around me in hopes that they make me look cool, not the least of which is my wife.

As we continue our sermon series today called “Death by Suburb,” we’re going to look at another way we can combat the spirit-numbing existence we often find in the suburbs. We’re going to continue and try to move deeper into our own spiritual lives, beyond the glossy façade that suburbia puts up.

What I found as I read books on this subject and started working on these sermons was that I don’t really have a lot to say that I want to hear. There aren’t a lot of pats on the back to be found when looking at suburban spirituality, and this is especially true when we look in the mirror and examine our self-image and what defines that.

I have always fell prey to the idea that I can transform into a better version of myself through the things I put on or around me. Growing up I had a big collection of sports jerseys that I would wear almost all the time. On Monday I could be Boomer Esiason, on Tuesday I was Chris Mullin, on Wednesday I was Pete Rose, on Thursday I was Dominique Wilkins. I had all kinds of shirts I could wear that I thought were an improvement upon plain old Kory Wilcoxson.

I don’t wear the jerseys anymore, but I still have my different shirts. There’s the husband shirt and the daddy shirt and the pastor shirt (it’s actually a robe). When needed I can slip into my athlete clothes or teacher suit or handyman outfit (the family hides when I put this one on). I have all kinds of things I can put on that I believe are an improvement on the original.

Now, you could argue that these aren’t disguises; they are simply symbolic of the roles we play every day. Spouse, parent, employee homemaker, coach, book club member. This is true. But the danger is that we can have so many roles in constant rotation that we lose the center, we lose sight of the essence of who we are.

And when that happens, and I think it happens a lot, we lose the anchor for our self-definition. When we are no longer grounded in God’s reality, we start defining ourselves in two ways: (1) by what we do, and (2) by what we own.

When talking about silence last week, I talked a little bit about how we have trouble simply being because we always feel we should be doing. And this is reinforced by how we define ourselves. What’s one of the first questions we ask when we meet

someone? “So, what do you do?” And doesn’t our answer always steer the direction of the conversation? If you say you’re in sales, they may ask about your product. If you say you’re a broker, they may ask about the market. If you say you’re a pastor, they may turn and run. Suburbia tells us that we are what we do.

The second way we define ourselves is over and against those around us. This is especially true in the suburbs, where we are blessed with abundance and the means to have the good life. And while we may not admit it, we begin to believe we deserve this, and we don’t want anyone have a “more good life” than us.

Millard Fuller, the founder of Habitat for Humanity, held a workshop at a seminary with over 200 pastors in attendance. When asked why the church struggles to get the funding it needs, greed and selfishness were named as the main reasons. Fuller asked, “Raise your hand if you think it is possible for a person to build a house so large that it’s sinful in the eyes of God.” All the hands went in the air. “OK,” said Fuller, “then can you tell me at exactly what size a house becomes sinful to occupy?” The pastors were silent. Finally, a voice in the back of the room said, “When it’s bigger than mine.”

While many of us wouldn’t like to admit it, there are unwritten rules in suburbia about what it’s OK to own and to not own. Cars must either be only a few years old or of vintage model, houses must have a minimum number of bedrooms and bathrooms, vacations must be for a certain length of time and in a significantly warmer climate (unless you’re going skiing). Now, few of us would ever admit that such criteria exist. In fact, we usually only become aware of it when we fail to meet them and fall behind.

Stop for a minute and think what your first reaction is inside when you pull up next to a car that has a little more rust than yours, or doesn’t have the flip-down DVD player like yours does, or makes a funny grinding noise that yours doesn’t. Forget that yours takes three times as much gas. How do you feel when you look at the person next to you and know you’ve got it a little better?

For all that we do and all that we own, David Goetz makes the point that our greatest status symbol is not our job or our stuff, but our children. In fact, he calls them immortality symbols. They are the things through which we will continue to live on after we die, and we don’t want to live a mediocre legacy. So we encourage our kids to be the best at everything they do, or, although we may not realize it, at least better than the neighbors’ kids. Goetz calls parenting the most competitive adult sport.

Now I admit right up front that this strikes a nerve with me. I have two bright, beautiful daughters, and while I’m not biased enough to believe they are the smartest, most beautiful girls in the entire universe, I believe they are in the top one percent. And when anyone even dare implies that they are less than the best (the teacher have the nerve to give Sydney an A- ??), the ego in me turns into the Incredible Hulk. There are a lot of parents in the world who wish their children were as good as average, but average isn’t enough in the suburbs. What wants to be average?

This all ties back to the Slippery Rock sweatshirt and the sports jerseys, because it’s all a function of what Goetz calls image management. We work hard to manage how people see us, because no one wants to be seen as just average, and I wonder if there isn’t a fear inside all of us that who we are by itself isn’t quite good enough. So we always are trying to make ourselves look better in every conceivable way. How else do we explain the fact that last year as a country we spent \$2 billion on missions and \$8 billion on weight reduction programs?

Jesus touches upon this when he talks about the thorny issues of denying ourselves and taking up his cross. Notice that he says we must do both of those things before we follow him. He knows better than anyone that one of the greatest obstacles to truly following Jesus is our own selves.

The irony is this: We are homeowners who take pride in the size and appearance of our houses, but serve a Christ who had nowhere to lay his head. We are consumers who strive to drive the best and biggest cars, yet worship a Christ who walked everywhere. We are parents who want our kids to be first-stringers instead of benchwarmers, and yet we worship a Christ who welcomed all the children, not just those on the honor roll. We are a culture that defines our value based on our performance and productivity, and yet we worship a Christ who was loved and accepted by God, not for what he did, but for who he was.

What Christ means by denying ourselves is realizing that there's nothing about us that makes us any more special than anyone else, and that our goal shouldn't be to stand out above the crowd, but to be one with the community. The suburbs tell you if you want to make a name for yourself, you have to be so much more than what you truly are. Christ tells us that if you want to make a name for yourself, you just have to be yourself, and leave it to God to make you more than yourself.

Come to think of it, when we talk about how we see ourselves, we should be all about image management. Our image should be very important to us. Because the first chapter of Genesis tells us that we are made in the image of God. That's the only image that matters. You are not defined by what you do or what you own. You are defined by who you are and Whose you are. Period.